

Website Design and Content Standards

(Updated June, 2004)

Introduction (Amended November 2002)

These standards arise out of the *Government of Nova Scotia's Internet Policy* of April 1, 1997. The Priorities and Planning Committee approved the following policy statement:

"It is the policy of the Government of Nova Scotia that the interests of the Province with respect to its Internet presence are best served by maintaining a professional design and content standard on Government World Wide Web sites, and that Communications Nova Scotia is accountable for same."

The intention of these standards is to assist departments and agencies with the production of their websites. The standards are a framework for development, within which there is potential room for variation: not every website need look exactly like every other, as long as there is consistency throughout the Government of Nova Scotia website as a whole. This includes—as on this page—the proper use of identifier graphics, "breadcrumbs" (location indicator), the search function and "Go" graphic, the "How Do I Find..." link, the blue underline, the left hand navigation menu, the link colours, and the footer style, and ensuring that all Government of Nova Scotia websites are clearly identifiable as such (as determined by Communications Nova Scotia). Consistent design presents a strong corporate identity, gives the website coherence and integrity, improves usability, and helps to strengthen the individual and overall messages. Communications Nova Scotia has been given the responsibility to ensure that the policy is followed.

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Points in brief

General Considerations

1. Look and Feel (Amended June 2004)

All websites must have the same general look and feel.

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2. Professional Design and Content (Amended January 2000)

All pages must be of professional quality in terms of design and content.

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3. Headings and Titles (Amended June 2004)

Publications and individual parts of publications (if any) must contain appropriate headings (and a title).

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Editorial Standards**4. Plain Language (Amended June 2004)**

Ensure that you write clearly and concisely. For more information, please see the plain language pages on the Communications Nova Scotia website. Information on writing for the web [may be found here](#).

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5. Acronyms

Do not overuse acronyms, and avoid their use in the titles of pages. Make sure that viewers can easily find the full version of an acronym on every page using the acronym.

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6. Cultural Differences

Authors must have sensitivity to how people from different cultures might view items on the provincial website.

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X/HTML Specification**7. X/HTML Standards (Amended June 2004)**

The preferred specification to be designed for is XHTML 1.0 Transitional. Pages should be styled using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS).

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8. Validating Pages (Amended June 2004)

It is highly recommended that X/HTML coding be checked by running all documents through an X/HTML syntax checker. Style sheets should be checked with the free W3C online validator.

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General Website Design**9. Page Layout (Amended June 2004)**

Web pages should be designed with the aim of providing clear and easy access to the services and information provided.

All pages must use the proper identifier graphics, "breadcrumbs" (location indicator), search function and "Go" graphic, the "How Do I Find..." link, the

blue underline, the left hand navigation menu, the proper link colours, and the footer style as shown on this page. Note that although the use of colour in the left hand navigation menu is optional, where used it must be implemented in the same manner as this page with the yellow and blue colour location indicators.

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10. Website Layout (Amended June 2004)

It is recommended that the services provided by departments and agencies occupy centre stage on websites. Most (but not all) visitors will not be especially interested in the structure of government; rather, they will be trying to find out what services are available, or will be looking for information on a particular service.

It is still important, and all sites should provide (where applicable) at a minimum, the following pages: a home page, "About the Department/Agency", "Services", "Contact Us", "Publications", and "What's New". The "About the Department/Agency" page may be left out if the appropriate information is incorporated into the home page. There should also be a link to the News Releases site (gov.ns.ca/news/). The News Releases link can be customized so that visitors see the appropriate department/agency banner at the top of the page. Please contact Allan Lawlor of Communications Nova Scotia for help with this feature (e-mail: lawlorja@gov.ns.ca; Tel. 424-4492).

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File Naming

11. Use of Long Filenames is Permitted (Amended June 2004)

The use of long filenames (e.g., beyond the eight character limit of DOS) is permitted. The main provincial webserver is able to handle the long filenames made possible with Windows 95/98/ME/XP, Win NT/2000, and Mac OS.

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Multimedia

12. Multimedia Formats (Amended June 2004)

It is recommended that only the most popular and stable forms of multimedia files be considered for use.

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Graphics

13. Graphic Formats (Amended August 2003)

The use of graphics can be important in providing an interesting website. However, every attempt should be made so that, wherever possible, visitors with text-only access are able to obtain the same information as visitors with full graphics capabilities.

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Dynamic Treatments and Applications

14. Scripts and Dynamic Pages (Amended June 2004)

Scripts, database linking, and other technologies can be used to provide services and experiences beyond standard pages, but should be designed and implemented with great care.

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Accessibility

15. Accessibility (New August 2003)

Accessibility is the issue of providing access to web pages for users who might have disabilities, or use alternative types of browsers such as screen readers. It is suggested that departments and agencies consider moving towards making their web pages more closely adhere to the W3C Priority 1 and 2 checkpoints when possible and where practical.

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Privacy

16. Privacy Statement Link (New June 2004)

This refers to the proper implementation of the Privacy Statement link. It should be done as at the bottom of this page. On pages where there is no accessibility notice, the Privacy link should be the last link on the page.

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Questions?

Please get in touch with Geoffrey Kerson (424-2978, e-mail: kersong@gov.ns.ca) of Communications Nova Scotia to discuss any matters relating to Internet publishing. To discuss technical issues related to websites, please contact Mike Embree (424-2827, e-mail: embreem@gov.ns.ca) of Transportation and Public Works.

Points in detail

General Considerations

1. Look and Feel (Amended June 2004)

All websites must have the same general look and feel so that visitors from anywhere in the world will always know when they are on a Government of Nova Scotia website. Consistent design presents a strong corporate identity, gives the website coherence and integrity, and helps to strengthen the individual and overall messages. This consistency of corporate identity is found on all of the better corporate and government websites.

Communications Nova Scotia has been given the responsibility to ensure that the policy is followed.

This does not mean that all pages on all sites must be identical; rather, it means that diversification of sites is permitted (up to a point) as long as there is continuity across the sites, and that it is always clear to visitors that they are on a Government of Nova Scotia website (as determined by Communications Nova Scotia). It is especially important that all sites use the proper header graphics, have informative page titles (which can assist search facilities), and use extremely similar navigation. It is essential that visitors need not have to learn a new navigation system for every part of the

Government of Nova Scotia website that they visit.

It is recommended that, if there is any question about any of these points, you get in touch with Communications Nova Scotia. Certainly contact us before you get too far into a redesign of your website so that we can ensure all sites work together. Please contact Geoffrey Kerson by phone at 424-2978 or e-mail: kersong@gov.ns.ca.

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2. Professional Design and Content (Amended January 2000)

Nova Scotia has a tradition of high quality products. We need to maintain and add to this tradition with the Nova Scotia Government website. The website can influence the image of Nova Scotia within the province, Canada, and the rest of the world. Therefore, it is imperative that the website give a favourable impression of Nova Scotia.

Free assessments of design and content (or original design and/or content work for a fee) may be obtained from Communications Nova Scotia. Please contact Geoffrey Kerson by phone at 424-2978 or e-mail: kersong@gov.ns.ca.

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3. Headings and Titles (Amended June 2004)

Headings and titles must be used so that each part of a website (and publications, if any, on a website) is clearly related and linked to the website (or publication) as a whole. Through the effective use of titles, readers will always know what page they are viewing, and on which part of the provincial website it resides. A proper title can also increase the likelihood that appropriate pages will turn up when visitors use search facilities. For publications, a table of contents that is hyperlinked to the appropriate places in the text should be provided for all documents of more than a few screens in length. As well, other standard navigation aids should be incorporated on each page such as links leading back to the table of contents (if applicable), the beginning of individual articles (if their length warrants), and the departmental/agency home page.

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Editorial Standards

4. Plain Language (Amended June 2004)

The use of clear writing principles is important. Your website might be your first and only chance to communicate your message, and the first impression could last a long time. Although many visitors to the provincial website might be highly educated, most will not be government employees or work regularly in your department's field of concern. Many will have a first language other than English. Clearly written information will invite visitors to keep reading and will improve the chance that they will receive the message you are sending. Clear language includes consistent punctuation, correct spelling and usage, logical construction, consistent style, and accessibility of information, that is, logical use of links, headings, and indexes. Assume the reader knows nothing except how to read. If you would like advice or assistance, please contact Susan Lucy (Communications Nova Scotia) by phone at 424-2972 or e-mail: lucys@gov.ns.ca. Please also look at the plain

language pages on the Communications Nova Scotia website. Information on writing for the web may be found here.

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5. Acronyms

Acronyms are useful only if their meaning is clear, otherwise they obscure rather than assist the message. It is very likely that most visitors to the provincial website will be seeing most acronyms for the first time. Therefore, every acronym should be clearly defined on every series of pages. A good guideline is to write out the full name or phrase the first time it is used and follow it immediately with the acronym in parentheses.

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6. Cultural Differences

Some items, considered to be innocuous and understandable to most Canadians, might offend or be of ambiguous meaning to website visitors from other cultures.

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HTML Specification

7. X/HTML Standards (Amended June 2004)

As a web author you should try to provide compatibility with—as a bare minimum—the most popular browsers so that the great majority of visitors are able to have access to the information on the provincial website. The recommended way to ensure that your pages work with the most popular browsers is to code according to standards, rather than using coding hacks. Most features included in the HTML 4.01 and XHTML 1.0 Transitional specifications should be compatible with the web browsers of 98+% of the visitors to our site, but some visitors may still experience problems with frames, video, audio, Java, JavaScript (and other scripts), and stylesheets. Authors must test their pages with several different browsers (and preferably on a variety of machines with different screen sizes, resolutions, and processors) to improve the likelihood that visitors will see the pages as they are intended. Please also see the section on *accessibility*.

The use of Cascading Style Sheets for styling web pages is recommended. Please make sure that you carefully check your pages with a variety of browsers, as full and proper CSS1 (let alone CSS2) implementation is rare. Check your style sheet with the free W3C validation service. Make sure that your pages are usable even without the stylesheet(s).

It is also recommended that departments and agencies move towards using XHTML because of its advantages (see this article on the New York Public Library's website). Helpful articles on XHTML can be found here:

<http://www.nypl.org/styleguide/xhtml/guidelines.html>,

<http://www.alistapart.com/stories/betterliving/>, and

<http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml1/>.

Please note that the use of frames is not recommended. Frames are very difficult to implement well and take up large amounts of screen real estate. Also, if vital information is contained in one frame such as navigation and/or site identifiers), and the content is in another, bookmarking the site might

result in returning visitors receiving only the information contained in the content frame. Workarounds for this are conceivable (including inline frames), but not trivial. It is best to design your site without frames.

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8. Checking X/HTML Code (Amended June 2004)

It is very important to code X/HTML correctly. Some browsers are very forgiving and might show features as intended even with incorrect code, but different versions of even the most popular browsers may not be so forgiving, and the degree of forgiveness can vary from version to version. Also, as different ways to access the web become more popular (e.g. handheld devices), and in the interests of improving *accessibility*, the importance of proper coding and incorporating the correct Document Type Declaration at the top of documents become even more critical. X/HTML syntax checkers are included in some X/HTML authoring software, and there are websites that will do this for free.

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General Website Design

9. Page Layout (Amended June 2004)

It is a good idea to have a look at the *Communications Nova Scotia* website, which is a hybrid design between full HTML styling, and full CSS styling. The pages show how to use XHTML to set up the structure of the pages and CSS for most of the styling. Also, please notice that white space is present at the left hand margin, and line length is controlled. Both of these enhance legibility and assist in presenting a clean look, and therefore improve usability. The Communications Nova Scotia web pages also demonstrate the use of the latest banner identifier graphics and navigation.

The proper banner identifier graphics are to go at the top of every page. These are described at www.gov.ns.ca/cmns/banners/. These standard images are, of course, free. If a department or agency would like to have their banners modified to be unique for them, please contact Geoffrey Kerson (424-2978, e-mail: kersong@gov.ns.ca).

At the bottom of all pages there should be an e-mail address so that visitors can submit comments and questions about each site. The address given may be one set up expressly for the purpose of that particular website.

All entries should have the date of posting at the bottom of the page in the format "Year-Month-Day". If entries are updated, this date should be changed to the date of updating.

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10. Website Layout (Amended June, 2004)

The services provided by departments and agencies should be easy to find. Make sure that all information is presented in a clear and concise fashion.

Department and agency websites should usually include the following pages:

Home Page

The home page should be entitled something like (using the <title> tag) "Nova Scotia Department of [department name] Home Page". Agency websites can sometimes be more difficult to name, but should contain the words "Nova Scotia". The filename of the home page should be "default.htm" (although pages previously named "index.htm" need not be retitled). Underneath the departmental/agency graphic can be the mission statement and/or a very brief description of the department or agency. There must also be links to the other pages of the site, which should include as a minimum the following pages: About the Department/Agency (unless all of the relevant information is on the home page), Services, Contact Us, Publications (if applicable), and What's New (if applicable). Nothing in this description precludes highlighting the services on the home page; it is, in fact, recommended that services be highlighted on the home page. It is not recommended that a pointer to external sites be on the home page as this gives viewers a reason to leave the site before exploring more of it.

About the Department/Agency Page

This page should be entitled "About the Department of [department name]" or "About [agency name]". This page should contain basic information about the department/agency, possibly including the mission statement. Links may be included to pages containing more detailed information and/or the Information and Services page, if appropriate.

Services Page

This page should contain an in-depth description of the services provided by the department or agency, and contact information. In cases where departments or agencies offer a large number of services, this page may consist of links to separate pages for different services.

Contact Us Page

This page should be entitled "Contact Us", "Contacting the Department of [department name]" or "Contacting [agency name]". This page should contain detailed contact information such as the physical location(s), mailing address(es), and phone and fax numbers of offices, and the phone numbers, fax numbers and e-mail addresses of key contact people.

What's New Page

The latest information or items of interest may be placed here, and should be accompanied by the date. If the news is of a new site or service, posting a notice on the main "What's New?" page should be considered.

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File Naming

11. Use of Long Filenames is Permitted (Amended June 2004)

The use of long filenames (e.g., beyond the eight character limit of DOS) is permitted. The main provincial webserver is able to handle the long filenames made possible with Windows 95/98/ME/XP, Win NT/2000, and Mac OS.

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Multimedia

12. Multimedia Formats (Amended June 2004)

Multimedia should be used carefully and in general should not replace the standard textual presentation of information. Large-scale use of multimedia can make visitors without the necessary plug-ins or latest browser version—not to mention the visually or hearing impaired—feel excluded. This does not rule out the use of multimedia, because it can provide unique experiences. Proper use of multimedia can also help to showcase the technological capabilities, tourism opportunities, and business advantages of Nova Scotia. Departments and agencies should, however, choose only from the most commonly used cross-platform types of multimedia formats for delivery over the Internet. Communications Nova Scotia can help you if you wish to arrange for the creation of these types of files.

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Graphics

13. Graphic Formats (Amended August 2003)

Try to optimize graphics for transmission over a 28.8 kBaud modem. A page that loads too slowly will possibly lose the casual visitor and irritate someone visiting the site for a specific purpose. Exceptions may be made on a case-by-case basis (and notice of the size given beside the link), but even large colour graphics should be less than 60 kilobytes. Graphics should be in JPEG or GIF format, which are the formats most widely supported by graphics-capable browsers. PNG support of web browsers is still too uneven to rely on this format.

Graphics services are available from Communications Nova Scotia. Please contact Chris Cairns by phone at 424-2973 or e-mail: cairnsc@gov.ns.ca.

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Dynamic Treatments and Applications

14. Scripts and Dynamic Pages (Amended June 2004)

Scripts, database, linking and other technologies can be used to provide services and experiences beyond standard pages, but should be designed and implemented with great care. As with the multimedia elements described in section 12 (some of which can overlap into this area, as some of these can overlap into multimedia provision), great care must be taken to ensure that the widest possible audience can have access to these experiences and services, or to lower-tech solutions that provide as much of the experience and service as possible. Careful planning and testing on a variety of platforms and with different browsers is essential.

User Interface design and technical issues can be discussed with Geoffrey Kerson (424-2978, e-mail: kersong@gov.ns.ca (design), and Mike Embree (424-2827, e-mail: embreem@gov.ns.ca) of Transportation and Public Works (technical).

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Accessibility

15. Accessibility (New August 2003)

Accessibility is the issue of providing access to web pages for users who might have disabilities, or use alternative types of browsers such as screen readers. It is recommended that departments and agencies consider moving towards making their web pages more closely adhere to the W3C Priority 1 and 2 checkpoints when possible and where practical.

Background information on the issue of web accessibility, international efforts to improve it, and some methods to increase accessibility can be found on the Canadian government website at http://www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/clf-upte/1/1_e.asp) and the W3C website at <http://www.w3.org/Talks/WAI-Intro/slide1-0.html>. Other guidelines and techniques for improving accessibility can be found at <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/> and <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10-TECHS/>.

Proper adherence to the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative checkpoints and techniques will allow more people to have access to government information and services. The same practices make sites more accessible to search engines (which have many of the same accessibility problems with most sites as do people with disabilities), which will make it easier for more people to find government information and services.

Other methods that can improve accessibility:

1. Ensure that there is sufficient contrast between text and background colours (and any patterns) on all web pages. Test your pages with a method that ignores colour or simulates colour blindness (such as Vischeck at <http://www.vischeck.com/>).
2. Use accessibility features such as the tabindex attribute (see <http://www.alistapart.com/stories/accesskeys/> for an explanation) and other alternatives for people not using a mouse to interact with your site. Ensure that you provide a description of the access features used on your site and how to use them, and that a link to this information is at the bottom of every page.
3. Check your pages with an accessibility service like Bobby (<http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp>) or Cynthia Says (<http://www.contentquality.com>), and intelligently analyze the results. Remember that these services are only software and can't be relied upon to be foolproof.

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Privacy

16. Privacy Statement Link (New June 2004)

The link to the Privacy Statement should be done as on this page. On pages where there is no accessibility notice, the Privacy Statement link should be the last link on the page. Please refer to the Privacy Statement and Policy pages for more information.

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Questions?

Please get in touch with Geoffrey Kerson (424-2978, e-mail: kersong@gov.ns.ca) of Communications Nova Scotia to discuss any matters relating to Internet publishing. To discuss technical issues related to websites, please contact Mike Embree (424-2827, e-mail: embreem@gov.ns.ca) of Transportation and Public Works.

Please note that links to external sites do not imply endorsement of them.

